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## Exploring the Early Americas Columbus and the Taíno



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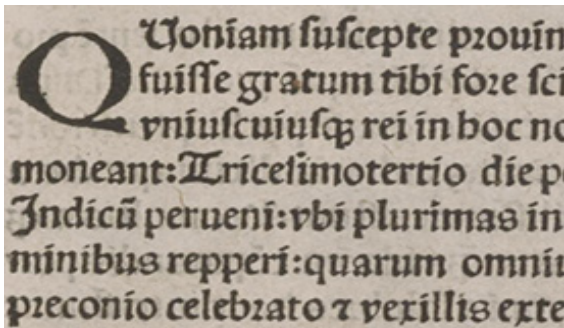
When Christopher Columbus arrived on the Bahamian Island of Guanahani (San Salvador) in 1492, he encountered the Taíno people, whom he described in letters as "naked as the day they were born." The Taíno had complex hierarchical religious, political, and social systems. Skilled farmers and navigators, they wrote music and poetry and created powerfully expressive objects. At the time of Columbus's exploration, the Taíno were the most numerous indigenous people of the Caribbean and inhabited what are now Cuba, Jamaica, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. By 1550, the Taíno were close to extinction, many having succumbed to diseases brought by the Spaniards. Taíno influences survived, however, and today appear in the beliefs, religions, language, and music of Caribbean cultures.



### Columbus's Account of 1492 Voyage

After his first transatlantic voyage, Christopher Columbus sent an account of his encounters in the Americas to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain. Several copies of his manuscript were made for court officials, and a transcription was published in April 1493. This Latin translation was published the same year. In reporting on his trip to his sovereigns, Columbus wrote:

*There I found very many islands, filled with innumerable people, and I have taken possession of them all for their Highnesses, done by proclamation and with the royal standard unfurled, and no opposition was offered to me.*



[Enlarge](#)

Christopher Columbus (1451–1506). *Epistola Christofoi Colom* (Letters of Christopher Columbus). Rome: Stephan Plannck, after April 29, 1493. [Rare Book and Special Collections Division](#), Library of Congress (048.00.00, [048.00.01](#), [048.00.02](#), [048.00.03](#))

### Columbus's Voyage and the New World

This edition of the Columbus letter, printed in Basel in 1494, is illustrated. The five woodcuts, which supposedly illustrate Columbus's voyage and the New World, are in fact mostly imaginary, and were probably adapted drawings of Mediterranean places. This widely published report made Columbus famous throughout Europe. It earned him the title of Admiral, secured him continued royal patronage,

and enabled him to make three more trips to the Caribbean, which he firmly believed to the end was a part of Asia. Seventeen editions of the letter were published between 1493 and 1497. Only eight copies of all the editions are extant.

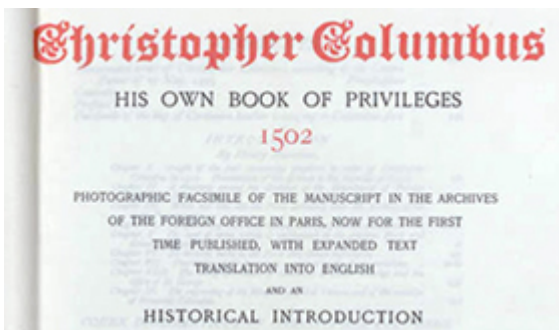


[Enlarge](#)

Christopher Columbus. *De Insulis nuper in Mari Indico repertis in Carolus Verardus: Historia Baetica*. Basel: I.B. [Johann Bergman de Olpe], 1494. Jay I. Kislak Collection, [Rare Book and Special Collections Division](#), Library of Congress (048.01.00, [048.01.01](#), [048.01.02](#), [048.01.03](#))

### Columbus's Book of Privileges

On January 5, 1502, prior to his fourth and final voyage to America, Columbus gathered several judges and notaries at his home in Seville to authenticate copies of original documents in which Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand had granted titles, revenues, powers, and privileges to him and his descendants. These thirty-six documents are popularly called Columbus's "Book of Privileges." Four copies of his "Book" existed in 1502, including one now in Paris from which the elaborate facsimile shown here was made. This publication was one of a number of major documentary projects commemorating the 400th anniversary of the first Columbus voyage in 1892.



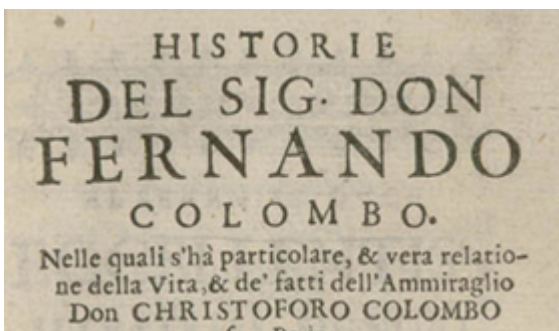
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Benjamin Stevens, first comp. and ed. *Christopher Columbus, His Own Book of Privileges, 1502*. London: Chiswick Press, 1893. Jay I. Kislak Collection, [Rare Book and Special Collections Division](#), Library of Congress (050.00.00, [050.00.01](#), [050.00.02](#), [050.00.03](#))

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### Columbus Biography Written by His Son

Fernando Colón was born in Córdoba, Spain, in 1488 and spent his early years there with his mother. As a youth, he traveled to the New World with his father on Columbus's fourth voyage. As an adult, Fernando became a scholar and built a large personal library using the income from his father's legacy. Fernando wrote this biography in defense of his father in about 1538.

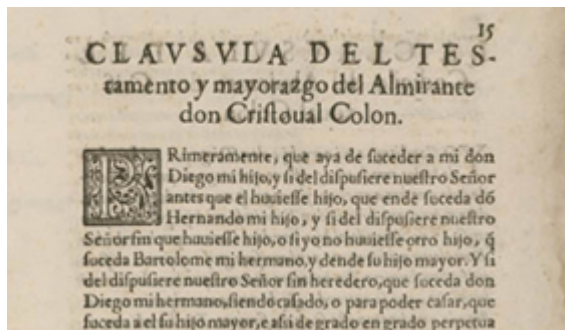


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Fernando Colón (1488–1539). *Historie del sig. don Fernando Colombo, nelle quali s'hà particolare, & vera relatione della vita, & de' fatti dell'ammiraglio don Christoforo Colombo suo padre* (History by Don Fernando Columbus . . . Don Christopher Columbus, his father). Milan: Girolamo Bordonì, [1614]. Jay I. Kislak Collection, [Rare Book and Special Collections Division](#), Library of Congress (051.00.00, [051.00.02](#), [051.00.03](#))

## Columbus's Legacy

The grants of privileges and property bestowed on Christopher Columbus by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella became the subject of ongoing litigation between his descendants and the Spanish crown that lasted for centuries. The dispute was finally settled in 1796 in favor of Columbus's descendants. This collection of printed documents, which includes extracts of Columbus's will, relates to a dispute over the line of inheritance of one of the explorer's estates in the Americas.



[Enlarge](#)

Christopher Columbus. *Por parte del conde de Gelues, de doña Francisca Colon, de don Christoual Colon, y de don Baltasar Colon, se suplica a V.m. que cerca de la executoria que la parte de la marquesa de Guadaleste pide, de la que llama sente[n]cia, dada en su fauor por el consejo Real de las Indias.* [Spain: s.n., ca. 1586]. Jay I. Kislak Collection, [Rare Book and Special Collections Division](#), Library of Congress (052.00.00, [052.00.01](#), [052.00.02](#), [052.00.03](#))

## Ceremonial Wooden Stool

Preserved Pre-Columbian *duhos* (ceremonial wooden stools) from the Caribbean region are exceedingly rare because they are usually found only in dry highland caves. There are two basic types: low horizontal forms with concave seats, such as this one, and stools with long curved backrests. Scholars differ as to the function of the stools. Some believe they represented seats of authority. Others think they served as altars for votive offerings. Still others argue that the Taíno peoples used them as ceremonial trays for making cohoba, a hallucinogenic snuff prepared for shamanistic rituals.



[Enlarge](#)

Ceremonial wooden stool ("Duho"). Haiti. Taíno, AD 1000–1500. Carved lignum vitae. Jay I. Kislak Collection, [Rare Book and Special Collections Division](#), Library of Congress (054.00.00). ©Justin Kerr, Kerr Associates

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## Taíno Amulet

The Taíno, a subgroup of the Arawakan Indians from northeastern South America, inhabited the Greater Antilles (Cuba, Jamaica, Hispaniola, and Puerto Rico). The Taíno created a complicated religious system that included a hierarchy of deities, which included Yucahu, the supreme Creator and the lord of cassava and the sea and Atabey, the goddess of fresh water and human fertility, as well as Yucahu's mother. The Taíno believed that *zemis*, gods of both sexes, represented by both human and animal forms, provided protection.



### Spatula Used for Purging

This long, gracefully curved spatula was used for purging before taking the sacred trance-inducing cohoba, a powerful snuff of nicotine-rich tobacco. The earlobes and eye sockets once held inlays, perhaps of gold leaf or shell.



[Enlarge](#)

Effigy bone vomitive spatula. Greater Antilles. Taíno, AD 700–1500. Carved manatee rib. Jay I. Kislak Collection, [Rare Book and Special Collections Division](#), Library of Congress (056.00.00). Photo ©Justin Kerr, Kerr Associates

### Heart-Shaped Vessel

This intact pottery container is a heart-shaped bottle covered with complex iconography, including female and male attributes. The two lobes represent female breasts and the neck, a phallus. Scholars believe these vessels were water containers used in rituals and ceremonies.



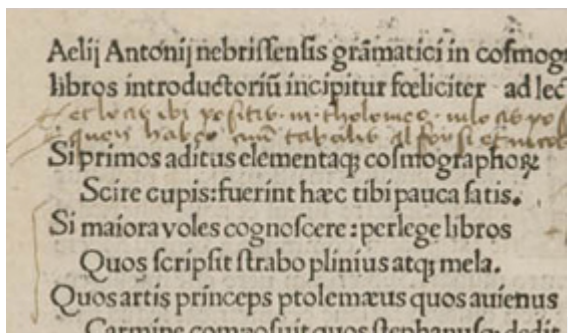
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Heart shaped vessel. Dominican Republic. Taíno, AD1000–1500. Ceramic. Jay I. Kislak Collection, [Rare Book and Special Collections Division](#), Library of Congress (057.00.00)

### Early Description of the New World

Antonio Nebrija, best known for attempting to standardize the Castilian dialect of Spanish as a written language, had many geographical interests. Advisor to Columbus's son Ferdinand Colón, Antonio Nebrija attempted to update the geography of Ptolemy, Strabo, Pliny, and other classical sources "to the reality of our times" and to include information from the discoveries of contemporary European explorers. This book contains one of the earliest descriptions of the New World.



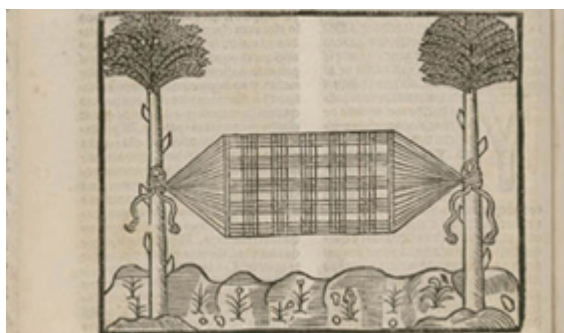

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Antonio Nebrija. *Introductorium in Cosmographiae libros* [Introduction to cosmography]. Salamanca: Printer of Nebrija, ca. 1498. [Rare Book and Special Collections Division](#), Library of Congress (53.00.00, [53.00.01](#), [53.00.02](#), [53.00.03](#))

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## Chronicling the New World

Gonzalo Oviedo sailed in 1514 on the first of his many journeys to America, where he compiled detailed descriptions and woodcut illustrations of products and goods found in the New World. The Spaniard introduced Europe to an enormous variety of previously unheard of "exotica," including the pineapple, the canoe, smoking tobacco, the manatee, and hammocks. Along with Perro Mártir de Angleria and Bartolomé de las Casas, Oviedo was one of the first European chroniclers of New World goods.


[Enlarge](#)

Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés (1478–1557). *La historia general delas Indias* (The general history of the Indies). Seville: Cromberger, 1535. Jay I. Kislak Collection, [Rare Book and Special Collections Division](#), Library of Congress (067.00.00, [067.00.01](#), [067.00.02](#), [067.00.03](#))

## Girolamo Benzoni

In 1541, Girolamo Benzoni left his native Milan for a fifteen-year trip through South and Central America. He published this account of his travels in 1565. Shocked by experiences of Spanish cruelty toward the Indians, Benzoni denounced the mistreatment. He also criticized importation of African slaves. Although Benzoni has been criticized for exaggeration, his work provides a compact history of the Americas from the arrival of Columbus to the conquest of Peru, from firsthand perspective not colored by Spanish bias. His crude woodcut illustrations give a glimpse of indigenous life before it was altered by European civilization.


[Enlarge](#)

Girolamo Benzoni (b. 1519). *La historia del mondo nuovo di M. Girolamo Benzoni Milanese* [The history of the New World of Mr. Girolamo Benzoni of Milan]. [Venice: F. Rampazetto, 1565.] [Rare Book and Special Collections Division](#), Library of Congress (068.00.00, [068.00.01](#), [068.00.02](#), [068.00.03](#))

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